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STATE DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/CEN

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SUBJECT: BOUCHER FINDS COOPERATION ON AFGHANISTAN, BUT REFORM ON THE SLOW TRACK IN TAJIKISTAN

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CLASSIFIED BY: TRACEY A JACOBSON, AMBASSADOR, EXE, DOS.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

11. (C) Summary: In meetings in Dushanbe on April 20, 2009 South and Central Asia Assistant Secretary Richard Boucher emphasized several key issues with Tajik President Rahmon and Foreign Minister Zarifi:

-- the need for increased cooperation and engagement on Afghanistan;

-- the need for economic reform, particularly in light of the current economic crisis and the negative results of the Central Bank Audit;

-- the danger that the new law on religion excludes and could radicalize religious minorities; and

-- the need for serious electoral reform before the May 2010 parliamentary elections.

Boucher indicated that the United States is seeking greater involvement in Central Asia, sees Tajikistan as an energy supplier to the region in the long term and will engage with Uzbekistan to help that come about. Rahmon and Zarifi expressed strong interest in expanding cooperation on Afghanistan, complained that their requests for bridges and other Afghanistan-related projects were going unanswered, and called for a clear U.S. position in favor of their hydropower projects.

Both brushed aside Boucher's advice on economic reform, elections, and freedom of religion. End Summary.

BE PREPARED

12. (C) As usual, Rahmon, looking tired, began with a set-piece performance, reading a lengthy statement on regional issues and bilateral relations, with several complaints thrown in: bilateral relations are good, but we must pay more attention to

trade and economic cooperation. This is especially important in the current economic crisis, when Tajikistan is suffering from falling remittances and low cotton and aluminum prices. Tajikistan seeks U.S. support for its energy and road projects, which contribute to stabilizing Afghanistan. The new U.S. strategy on Afghanistan and Pakistan is praiseworthy for its clearness and emphasis on integration of goals, but ignores regional efforts to stabilize Afghanistan. Border security around Afghanistan should be a major focus, to prevent problems there from spreading. Tajikistan wants to help more on Afghanistan, but its proposal to host a NATO antiterrorism center went unanswered. The International Security Assistance Forces should focus more on counternarcotics, and Tajikistan expects to receive more assistance as part of this effort. Tajikistan has quickly approved transit of cargo to international forces in Afghanistan, but its proposals for infrastructure improvements (particularly another bridge to Afghanistan) are unanswered. Tajikistan also wants more educational and "humanitarian" contacts with the United States.

13. (C) At times departing from the script he was reading, Rahmon described his chronic problems with Uzbekistan over construction of the Rogun dam and repeated winter power and gas cuts, saying that Uzbekistan simply wants to control and impoverish Tajikistan. Rahmon insisted that the Vakhsh River was not a transboundary river (at one point pulling out a tattered map) and so Tajikistan did not need to consult with anyone on its use. Rahmon decried Uzbek non-compliance with water sharing agreements reached last October in Bishkek, and said Karimov intended to "obstruct our economic independence." He asked for more United States attention to influence Uzbekistan.

14. (C) Rahmon gave a familiar litany of complaints about Russia, saying it aims to control central Asian water resources, and

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alternately supports the Kyrgyz, Uzbeks, and Tajiks against each other to do this. Russia follows its old colonial policy of divide-and-conquer in central Asia, and all the regional leaders, Karimov included, understand this. "The precedent of Georgia and Ukraine" is a lesson to central Asians, that they must not wait longer to resolve their mutual hostilities, which only serve to benefit Russia.

15. (C) Boucher said that the United States envisions Tajikistan in the long term as a power supplier to the region, that large long-term projects need to be completed, and the challenge is to get other regional countries to agree to this goal. The United States supports the Bishkek agreement and looks forward to results of the April 28 Foreign Ministers meeting on the Aral Sea in Almaty. Boucher said the United States will be more engaged on Uzbek-Tajik relations and regional water sharing issues in general. Boucher said that Presidents Obama and Medvedev, at their recent meeting, discussed working together on many issues including Afghanistan, but Obama made clear that the United States will not recognize a privileged sphere of influence for Russia, and will deal with Central Asian states directly.

16. (C) On Afghanistan, Boucher said the United States is pursuing an integrated civil/military strategy, and is establishing needs before allocating resources. The United States may seek Tajikistan's support in the form of expertise in water and agriculture for Afghanistan. He agreed with Rahmon's emphasis on border security and counternarcotics, and said the United States also views regional electrical supply projects as very important.

MOREL AND THE FRENCH CONNECTION

17. (C) Rahmon said he was surprised by EU Special Envoy to Central Asia Pierre Morel's, recent statements that large hydropower projects should be deferred in favor of more quickly achievable small hydropower stations. He met Morel during his recent visit to Brussels, seeking European Union support for Tajikistan's position on Rogun. Rahmon argued that he pulled away from all talk of cooperation with Russia on Rogun in order to work with the World Bank and European Union, introduced an anti-privatization law to protect Rogun as the Tajik government's special preserve, and allocated \$400 million to construction of Rogun. Morel's comments pushed Tajikistan back toward negotiations with Russia. Apparently confusing Morel with the French government, Rahmon said that Tajikistan had given France access to the Dushanbe airport to use for combat operations in Afghanistan when Uzbekistan refused them access; "if it continues this way, we will have to think about what to do." Boucher suggested that the Tajiks need to talk to Morel to clear up any misunderstanding.

IRAN

18. (C) Boucher explained that as part of its regional approach to solving problems in Central and South Asia, the Obama administration will further engage with Iran. The United States recognizes that Iran has a severe narcotics problem originating in Afghanistan and a common interest with the United States in combatting this problem. The United States has made clear to Iran that it is willing to work directly with the Iranians on counternarcotics. President Obama sees opportunities to work with Iran on other issues too, such as stabilizing Afghanistan, but also clearly recognizes the problems between Iran and the United States, in particular Iran's nuclear program and its support for terrorist groups. Rahmon praised President Obama's initiative to send Iran Navruz greetings, and described his visit to Iran a month and a half ago, where he urged Iranian leaders to normalize relations with the United States. He encouraged the United States to consider supporting an Iranian-funded gas pipeline via Iraq and Syria, noting this would lessen Russian influence in the region and give Europe another source of energy. He suggested that support for this gas line would be reasonable if Iran in turn ceased supporting

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terrorist groups. Russia, Rahmon added, wishes to maintain tensions in the U.S.-Iranian relationship to limit U.S. influence and increase its own in the region.

ECONOMIC REFORM

19. (C) Boucher asked what Rahmon intends to do about the recently-released results of the International Monetary Fund-ordered audit of the National Bank, noting that the report indicated that National Bank Chairman (and now Deputy Prime Minister) Alimardon illegally diverted some \$800 million. Rahmon laughed at this and said it was impossible that so much had been taken, adding that the amount cited was only a little smaller than the national budget. Boucher noted that cotton farmers still faced severe problems, and said the United States will work with the International Monetary Fund to help Tajikistan through a difficult time, but wants to use this aid to help advance economic reforms. He asked what plans Rahmon had to do the same. Rahmon replied that he wants to settle the

debt problems of cotton farmers, but that the World Bank and Asian Development Bank for years could not agree on either the scale of the problem nor a mechanism to resolve it, so nothing has been done.

¶10. (C) Rahmon asked about progress in resolving the future of the Manas airbase, noting that he counseled Bakiev against closing the base. He had even "for play" told Bakiev that he would give America a base in Tajikistan if it had to leave Kyrgyzstan, but then Rahmon also started "feeling Russian pressure." Boucher said that we have made some progress on this issue, emphasizing that the United States is not interested in geopolitical games, but simply in helping the countries of the region to take advantage of all economic opportunities.

¶11. (C) Rahmon concluded the meeting by suggesting that President Obama visit Tajikistan, and to keep in mind when visiting Kabul that Dushanbe was less than an hour's flight away. Boucher told Rahmon the Secretary wishes to intensify relations with Central Asia, wants to visit the region, and perhaps it is possible to build up to a presidential visit. The Tajik-United States relationship is steady and increasing, but we should look for areas in which we can make more progress.

ZARIFI - DEFENSIVE ON RELIGION LAW

¶12. (C) In a meeting with Foreign Minister Zarifi immediately preceding the meeting with President Rahmon, Boucher raised electoral and economic reforms, trafficking in persons, and the problems posed by the new law on religion. He noted in particular that the law on religion recently signed by President Rahmon, while obviously aimed at strengthening mainstream religion, also excludes other religious groups, banning them rather than encouraging them into the mainstream. Excluded people can become the nexus of political opposition, or of opposition to politics itself. Zarifi replied that Tajikistan lacks the strong security apparatus of the Soviet Union, needs a powerful mainstream religious movement to protect society from extremism, and that most Tajiks support the law. He blamed independent parliamentarian Hoji Akbar Turajonzoda for organizing opposition to the law, saying Turajonzoda wants to establish an Islamic state in Tajikistan. With so much extremism in the region, Tajikistan has to take care to prevent it from establishing itself here.

¶13. (C) Boucher noted that time has almost run out for serious reform of the elections law before the 2010 parliamentary elections, and that Tajikistan should work with the International Foundation for Electoral Systems and the OSCE to come up with a better law. Zarifi said the government has no problem working with the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, but that "we're not Europe." The last elections were better than those held before, and the next elections will be better still.

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¶14. (C) Noting the persistence of forced labor in the cotton sector, Boucher emphasized the high importance that Secretary Clinton attaches to fighting trafficking in persons. He asked Zarifi what Tajikistan can do to improve protection of children and prevention of trafficking in persons. Zarifi said he was of course concerned about child labor in the cotton sector, but it stems from Tajikistan's bad economic conditions. Saying that

things were so bad that children had died from cold in hospitals during the 2008 winter because of lack of electricity (something the Tajik government has previously insisted did not happen), Zarifi said what Tajikistan needs to solve this problem is to resolve its differences with Uzbekistan, build hydropower stations, and produce enough electricity to enable stronger economic growth. Tajikistan had made no decision yet on whether to attend the April 28 Ministerial on the Aral Sea in Almaty; the decision depended on signs from Uzbekistan that it would play a constructive role. Boucher suggested it is better for Tajikistan to attend. Commenting that Tajikistan will someday be a supplier of energy to the region, Boucher said the current economic crisis is an opportunity to help Tajikistan, through International Monetary Fund loans, to push forward on reforms of the power sector and other sectors which pay off in the long run.

COMMENT - OWNERSHIP ISSUES

¶15. (C) Rahmon hit all the usual notes on Uzbekistan, Russia, Iran, and Tajikistan's entitlement to further unconditional assistance. He almost ignored Boucher's points about economic reform and the National Bank audit results, and shifted blame for lack of progress on cotton sector debt to the international financial institutions, as if the Government of Tajikistan was a bystander. He appeared disengaged from the meeting until he took up the question of water sharing with Uzbekistan, where he spoke at length and in some detail but still displayed a weak understanding of transboundary water sharing issues. His obvious disinterest in economic reform suggests that pressure on the Tajik government - from the international community or from the global financial crisis - must increase significantly before we see any real changes. And Rahmon's simplistic view of water sharing makes clear that blame for regional tensions over water does not lie only on the Uzbek side. End Comment.

¶16. (U) Assistant Secretary Boucher has cleared this cable.
JACOBSON